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Science or Political Science - Workshop Explores Societal Concerns

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Approved By:
Daryl A. Brehm
Prepared By:
Lashonda McLeod

Report Highlights:
Some countries have argued that complex agricultural issues are larger than the risk assessment frameworks that governments have traditionally used to assist them in setting policy and creating regulatory measures. Under this reasoning, issues such as biotechnology, animal welfare, and climate change defy the rationale of science alone, and therefore fall outside the realm of WTO agreements. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) sponsored a workshop on the Economic and Trade Implications of Policy Responses to Societal Concerns. The purpose of the workshop was to explore the characteristics of societal

concerns that are relevant for designing policy responses to them. Participants included academia, government representatives, and the private sector, all of whom contributed to a wide range of views. The question emerged as to whether the OECD should be an active broker to help quantify "societal concerns," and provide a framework for economic analysis and gaining consensus on these types of difficult issues.

Executive Summary:

The Economic and Trade Implications of Policy Responses to Societal Concerns Workshop was held in Paris, France, at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development headquarters on November 2 and 3, 2009. The purpose of the Workshop was to explore the characteristics of societal concerns that are relevant for designing policy responses to them. The speakers and participants consisted of representatives from governmental and inter-governmental organizations, universities, and the private sector. This is a report of the proceedings, including viewpoints, which may be contrary to the U.S. position.

General Information:

Wicked vs. Tame Problems

The first session focused on identifying what makes societal concerns different from other policy problems. During this discussion, the example of multifunctionality was offered as an example of a very "wicked" issue. Wicked problems are associated with the following characteristics: many interdependencies, multi-causal, unintended consequences to solutions, moving targets, unstable, socially complex, rarely the responsibility of one organization, and involve changing people's behavior. Modern day examples of wicked problems are animal welfare, global climate change, biofuel production, GMO foods, sustainable development, and trade liberalization. The policy challenges posed by wicked problems are conflict in values over desirable outcomes, uncertainty about system component parts and outcomes, values are discussed before facts are gathered, and stakeholders must be engaged. Additionally, even when dialogue occurs and includes all actors, clear solutions rarely emerge. Via negotiation, processes are identified and judged, better or worse versus right or wrong.

"Tame" problems, on the other hand, have an identifiable source, are cost effective, and the cost and benefits are easily defined. New issues and social concerns are emerging (i.e., regional foods and labels, treatment of workers, protection of rural communities, GMOs). The implications for policy development are science can inform wicked problem decisions but cannot make them, science alone cannot decide the adequacy of risk assessments, and where there are substantial value divergences the design of the decision processes is crucial.

Dealing with Uncertainty, Precaution vs. Science

According to one presenter, in 2000, the European Commission stated that the precautionary principle applies where preliminary objective scientific evaluation indicates that there are reasonable grounds for concern. The principle is applicable when there is scientific evidence for a threat to the environment or to health, but the evidence, while sound, is not conclusive. The top

criticisms of the precautionary principle are: 1) it is ill defined; no one has any idea what the term really implies, 2) vacuous; does not lead to definite decisions, 3) too weak; contributes nothing that is not already there, e.g., risk assessment, 4) anti-scientific; mostly about unscientific prejudice, 5) merely an excuse for protectionism, and 6) the issues are better dealt within the courts.

The OECD defined societal concerns as, "crafting a universally applicable, comprehensive, and analytically tractable nomenclature of (ever evolving) societal concerns whose occurrence at the farm level, is a moving target. It should be stressed that just as defining societal concerns can be subject to subjective opinions, their classification suffers from the same shortcoming. Additionally, the risks or threats from hazards which impact on society and which, if realized, could have adverse repercussions for the institutions responsible for putting in place the provisions and arrangements for protecting people, e.g., Parliament or the Government of the day". U.S. Embassy Paris, Agricultural Affairs Counselor, explained the role of U.S. society in formulating regulatory frameworks. In the United States, there is an open and transparent process for public comment (the Federal Register). Also, civil litigation, town hall meetings, the legislative process and private citizen input all play a role.

Basically, supporters of the precautionary principle say it must be invoked when there is not enough science for a risk assessment. When there is a lack on knowledge or scientific controversy, the precautionary principle is applied. Invoking the precautionary principle implies a delicate interplay between the choice of possible normative standards of acceptability and scientific assessments, whether such standards would be violated without regulatory measures. For societal concerns, risk assessment and cost/benefit analysis based on science cannot capture the concerns of the society. The question remains, how do we identify, quantify, and analyze societal concerns as we do with other economic and trade issues?

When Values Differ in Societal Concerns

A Swiss ethicist presented work he performed toward value pluralism and decision making. He stated that dissimilar values must be respected and taken into account if decisions with ethical consequences are to be accepted. Values (in the social sciences) are interests, pleasures, likes, preferences, duties, moral obligations, desires, wants, needs, aversions and attractions, and many other modalities; deeply rooted conceptions about a set of phenomena. The four value dimensions are ethical, aesthetic, metaphysical, and material. Ethical values convey what is right or wrong in a moral sense. Aesthetic values refer to self-expression, style, and identity. Metaphysical values may or may not correspond to various outlooks of life. Material values communicate what is viewed as economically or practically valuable. Ethical, aesthetic, and material values are often intertwined and must be dealt with as such. A mixture of value dimensions must be dealt with in market and trade policy decisions, according to the presenter. Conflicts between deeply rooted values must be distinguish between the two types of conflicts: 1) disagreements, which take place within one common frame, and 2) controversies, which take place between separate frames. In inter-frame controversies, only frame critical debates and new types of facts are useful.

Most values within societal concerns surrounding agriculture cannot be handled within one or two voluntary standards. The entire range of values cannot be entirely adopted into one or a few policy schemes (e.g., organic labeling). Lastly, value-based differences that take place in the policy

process surrounding societal concerns should be discussed as openly as the facts, to stimulate reflective trust. The worst thing is that values are often hidden behind factual claims, and not deliberated. The entire range of values should be deliberated in close relation to the current schemes in a frame-critical manner. Then, this would give rise to the five following questions: 1) All values should be discussed, but should all value dimensions be seen in policy decisions? 2) What value dimensions (ethical, aesthetic, etc.) should be relevant parts of societal concerns subject to market and trade polices? 3) How could the relevant value dimensions be disintegrated in analyses and policy processes? 4) How should values based on erroneous or over-simplified, factual claims be dealt with in market and trade policies (e.g., "local = environmentally friendly")? 5) How should the intrinsic value of consumers-right-to-know be handled, in light of information overload, and ambiguous implications, in market and trade polices?

Case Studies: How Have Governments Responded to Societal Concerns?

A bottom-up approach to animal welfare in Swiss agriculture

In 1992, in Switzerland, there was a paradigm shift in agricultural policy, because of the separation between price and income policy. Due to increased pressure from animal rights groups, Parliament implemented animal welfare programs. Empirical, scientific, and practical considerations were taken into account. A year later, the Regular Outdoor Exercise for Livestock (ROEL) was implemented. The implementation of Particularly Animal-Friendly Stabling (PAS) occurred in 1995. ROEL and PAS require that the animal welfare needs of exercise, free movement, daylight, and care are met. Under the ROEL rules, cattle, horse, sheep, and goats must have at least 26 days per month of exercise during the summer months. During the winter months, the number of required outside exercise days is reduced to thirteen. The requirement for swine and poultry is daily outdoor exercise. Under the PAS program, animal fixation is not permitted. The animals must be in groups of at least two, there must be the resting place (with straw litter) and the activity area must be located in different sections. Additionally, daylight must be visible in the stable.

Enforcement of on-farm controls are carried out at least once every four years as required by law. On-farm controls, in practice, are conducted every two years. The regional control bodies are accredited by the Swiss Accreditation Service. The Swiss have evaluated measurable improvement of animal welfare; and PAS and ROEL have been proven effective. There are less signs of paralysis, injuries of teats and articulations, veterinary treatments in cows. Pigs have received fewer antibiotic treatments, injuries of dermis and articulations, and tail bites. In 2008, two percent (1,301 of 56,632) of farms were sanctioned (received payment cuts due to non-compliance). As for international trade dimension, both PAS and ROEL are considered Green Box programs, because they do not have an effect on production.

Animal welfare was anchored in Article 104 of the Federal Constitution in 1996. It was place into the Agricultural Act of 1999. Today, animal welfare legislation is a bottom-up, typical societal concern that is strongly pushed by vocal lobbying groups. With this issue, as well as with other societal concerns, values differ and there is no concrete scientific base. According to the speaker from the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), animal welfare represents a very emotional issue, but is being addressed within a scientific organization. OIE is considered to be well placed to provide international leadership to address animal welfare on a global basis.

GM food: Scientific disagreement or differing societal perceptions?

Obviously, consumer decisions are made on a case-by-case basis relative to their perceptions of risk and benefit. Sometimes, their decisions and perceptions are far from a rationale science-based approach. It was reported that, in the Europe Union, the resistance to genetically modified (GM) food was based on two things, the perceived risk and the resistance based on values and benefit analysis. Consumers viewed GM food as unnatural, therefore risky, because the long-term risk associated with GM food is unknown. Equivalence and risk analysis systems did not address consumer concerns and were not helpful. Consumers had ethical doubts concerning biotech food and its impact on biodiversity. The consumer choice issue had more to with marketing than with ideology. Additionally, there were no consumer benefits (e.g., lower prices) with first generation biotech. It is believed that third party countries and biotech companies were the main benefactors of biotech.

To respond to consumers' resistance, the European (EU) legislative framework objectives are to manage possible risks, foster innovation, protect consumers' right to known and choose, and to avoid trade barriers. Risk assessments are conducted under the European Safety Authority. The European Commission (EC) handles risk management through a regulatory committee procedure. This model is transparent, open to all Member States of the EU, and to more than half a billion EU citizens. To reassure citizens, product authorization is granted for 10 years and renewable for 10-year periods. Authorizations can be reviewed or withdrawn at any time. Also, the holder of the authorization is responsible for safety and post market monitoring. Authorized products are entered into the EC register, and all relevant information is included in that registration. It is compulsory for food and feed to contain labels stating that the product contain, consist of, and produced from biotech; regardless of the presence of modified DNA or proteins. There is a 0.9 percent threshold for adventitious presence of authorized GMOs. The EC has a national provision for GM-free labels and for menus. There is no provision for products obtained from animals fed with GM feed or treated with GM medicines (eggs, milk, and meat); however, this issue is becoming more and more important and often addressed at the private label. Some see fair-trade labeling as a trade-distorting way to handle lack of information, where consumers have a possibility to favor certain production conditions.

European Union consumers have views, in relation to biotech food, which differ from third country consumers, and appears to diverge from scientific objectivity. It is imperative that EU scientists deliver the best possible independent risk assessments. Policy makers must build a bridge between consumers and scientists.

The Path Ahead

The role of government when dealing with societal concerns is to help society determine what the true concerns of society are by conducting independent, sound risk assessments. It was concluded that the OECD could play a major role in providing guidance to governments on societal concerns. concerns. Countries will eventually get to the "real" societal concerns, and then move from the "wicked problems" to the "tamed problems."